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ABSTRACT

The question of credit by examination, placement and proficiency is studied. It is pointed out that this system is undergoing gradual change, and it is suggested that study of the dynamics of institutional change be conducted. Finally, it is noted that such study would add to our understanding of the nature of college education. (CK)

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# RESEARCH MEMORANDUM

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## RESEARCH ON THE CONTROVERSIES AROUND COLLEGIATE PLACEMENT AND CREDIT SYSTEMS

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Paper presented at a symposium on "Collegiate Placement and Credit Policies" at the 1973 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, La., March 1, 1973.

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# RESEARCH ON THE CONTROVERSIES AROUND COLLEGIATE PLACEMENT AND CREDIT SYSTEMS[1]

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In addressing ourselves specifically to the topic of research, perhaps a good place to begin is to ask what the ultimate impact of any research findings might be. In considering this topic, a rather curious possibility presents itself, namely that even if the research is carried out, and recommendations made, they are likely to have very little impact on anything.

A good case in point is the whole question of credit by examination, placement and proficiency and the like, which has generated a number of rather good and thorough research studies, virtually all of them with positive findings; that is, results showing that benefits would abound by the adoption of expanded programs of this type. Yet for all these years, the actual adoption of such programs was at a pace that would indicate that perhaps the findings had actually been negative, and the few programs that did get started were attempts to move against the predominant evidence. Suddenly, however, in just the last few years, we have seen an enormous increase in adoptions of such programs, and there appear to be many more in the process of adoption.

What caused this sudden change? Was it the case that all these positive research findings suddenly fell into the proper hands? Not very

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likely. Research findings simply were not having the impact that we in the field like to believe they can have. Rather, judging from my own review of the developments, the increase in interest seems to have been caused by a number of eventualities quite apart from the things that the research studies had been focusing on. One is the advent of Great Britain's Open University, which seemed to lend a prestige and respectability to the whole endeavor that a very tall stack of research reports could not. Another appears to be a change in the nature and needs of the student body, who more than ever have adopted a cafeteria-style approach to their education; this, in combination with the financial crisis of many institutions, evidently constituted a catalyst for innovation in a way never matched by research findings, significant at point-oh-one or not.

Obviously, then, the research studies had omitted something rather critical, if it was expected that their findings were to result in some sort of change in the real world. Evidently the scope of the studies was incomplete, or the findings would have had more impact of some sort, either concluding that there were some considerations that outweighed the positive findings, or at least describing what additional changes would have to be made in order for the program to be implemented. Otherwise, there would not be this apparent gap between what seemed to be called for and what, in fact, was the predominant case.

What I am suggesting, then, is that additional studies of the beneficial possibilities to be derived from credit by examination do not seem to be called for, but rather that the same effort and resources be directed toward studies of the dynamics of institutional change, as a focus of research. It would seem to be a very intriguing piece of research to do,

although I am, personally, a total novice at this kind of study; what sorts of things account for this evident gap between knowledge and practice? Obviously there is something that can account for that, but the attempts that I could find were, for the most part, informal and lacking the thoroughness that a concentrated effort could provide.

One way to begin might be to undertake a study with the intent to be partisan toward those who oppose the innovations that are typically suggested by previous studies. For example, it appears that for many years the advocates of change have invoked the observation that perhaps some of the so-called immeasurable benefits that are claimed for particular units of instruction are not measurable by objective examinations because they are not there to begin with. What I am suggesting is that this and other dismissals have proven sufficiently ineffective to indicate that their targets are worthy of study after all; perhaps the dismissal has been made too readily. Further, the techniques I am suggesting for the study is to take the advocacy role, and attempt to document positively those things which are, in fact, not measurable by objective examinations.

Whether the findings are positive or negative, it would seem that the product of this sort of study would be useful by adding to our understanding of the nature of the college education. And it would be very timely, in that it anticipates what may very possibly become a new kind of crisis, that of overutilization of examinations to the point that the entire practice falls into disrepute. If the clear limitations of objective examinations are described soon, such that a set of guidelines are made available for the rapidly increasing numbers of such programs, then the research will have made a most beneficial impact on the real-world practices.

Such a study, further, could provide some evidence for the investigation of two more traditional sorts of questions that have been suggested for the research. First, the question of differences between "placement" and "proficiency" measures, and whether or not the same examination should be used for the two; the primary question seems to be whether the content of the course can truly be encompassed by the same examination that can predict high achievement in the course.

Second, this sort of study would provide some information about the time interval problem; that is, the question of how long after a specific course of instruction should a student be expected to maintain a capacity to pass the equivalency exam for that course? This is a particularly intriguing question because it just might involve some sort of hypothesis about evolving benefits; that is, a theory of "setting in" of "wisdom" as a result of having been exposed to a course, the results of which could not by any means be measured promptly at the end of the course, but which would be expected to appear after a time. The measurement problems are very different in the two cases, and a specific study of the "immeasurables" within a particular course would advance our understanding of the differences.

As a final point about the research needs that I perceive to exist, almost apologetically I repeat the need for a nearly impossible project. I repeat it in all its vagueness and enormity because it represents a very effective, perhaps the single most difficult hurdle for educational improvement. It is simply the lack of definition of what constitutes a college education. It is the case that we still don't know, and for all of the increasing sophistication of our evaluational tools, we simply can't

evaluate a thing until we have an objective, and we can't seem to find any objectives that mark the baccalaureate clearly. It may be that here is the place where that rejoinder of "it may be unmeasurable because it is not there to begin with" does fit the case; perhaps the difficulty encountered in attempting innovation is totally a function of the fact that if you don't know where you are going, it is terribly difficult to know whether or not you are are getting there. I am not sure what specific contributions to the solution of this problem can be made by research, but it is clear that satisfying and definitive research on higher education will always be difficult while that problem exists.

In summary, I have tried to make three main points: First, the research findings of the past have not been considered the imperatives to action we sometimes imagine them to be, and perhaps this is the result of their incompleteness, failing as they did to address themselves to the problems of institutional change.

Second, one step in this direction would be the intensive, advocate-style study of the immeasurables in a college course, seeking to define the limitations of the objective examination in encompassing that course. There would be, it seems, both broad and timely benefits of such an attempt.

Third, the point was made that has been made by many others, that we are not likely to be able to make really satisfying comparisons between the traditional and innovative means of arriving at any objective that is as diverse and elusive as our modern college degree.